Ministry of Agriculture

Farm & Food Report

Communications Branch, Walter Scott Building
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Saskatchewan

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Log Number: 08-23-99
Week of June 2, 2008

SHEEP DEVELOPMENT BOARD WORKS TO GROW PRODUCTION

Sheep producers face favourable market conditions, and there is room for growth in the industry.

Increasing production is a key focus of the Saskatchewan Sheep Development Board (SSDB). According to executive director Gordon Schroeder, Canada produces only 45 per cent of its annual demand for lamb. Consequently, the industry is import-dependent, relying largely on New Zealand and Australian markets for supply.

Canadian lamb consumption is growing at an average rate of seven per cent per year, according to Schroeder. There are two factors contributing to the trend. For one, Canada has been experiencing a high level of immigration from countries where lamb is a staple of the cultural diet.

Secondly, young consumers are more experimental in their diet. "Today's younger generation is game to eat a lot of different things," said Schroeder. "They're experiencing lamb and enjoying it, so that's adding to consumption."

As a result of excess demand, sheep producers are enjoying high prices. "Everybody's looking for lambs. The prices are very strong," said Schroeder. "Demand is up, but production has been pretty stagnant, so we need to encourage greater supply."

The SSDB is taking action to increase production. One goal is to increase the number of producers. "We have starter kits to provide information. We offer seminars to help people get started in sheep. Anything we can do to assist and increase production, we're working hard on doing that right now," Schroeder stated.

Beef and pork producers are a potential source of new producers. The SSDB has received numerous inquiries. Cattle producers typically add sheep to their operations, as opposed to getting out of cattle entirely. For current livestock producers, the work involved in sheep production is quite similar.

Lambing season is the most labour-intensive time for sheep producers, but Schroeder notes that it depends on the level of involvement the farmer wants to commit. Moreover, factors within the producer's control are the time of year that the ewes are bred. If winter is chosen to be the lambing season, then more maintenance is required to ensure that the animals survive the cold weather.

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But overall, lambing may not involve as much work as expected. "We're finding, with some of the testing and research we're doing, that we probably meddle too much during lambing season, where we should just let them do it on their own more," said Schroeder. An alternate approach is to leave the animals to their own devices, and assist only if there are difficulties.

From there, Schroeder says the care requirements are pretty much downhill. "Once a lamb is born, production is fairly simple. They graze just like other animals, so it's not so much work then."

The biggest challenges that face sheep producers are high feed costs and predation. The coyote population is high, and the animals can be hazardous to sheep flocks. The problem of predation has had a significant impact on production, because it is so discouraging for producers to have their stock destroyed by a coyote. "Some producers get out of the industry altogether because of it."

Although the feed prices are high, so are the prices of sheep and lamb to compensate. "We're really pushing producers to know what their costs of production are," said Schroeder. "We're developing tools and computer programs to help." Despite the input costs, producers still find it a profitable industry in which to be operating.

The final barrier for the SSBD to overcome is attitude. Schroeder says people need to change their perception of sheep production from that of a cottage industry or hobby to that of a viable, profitable industry. He says it takes confidence for producers to believe that they can make a full-time job of sheep production, but it certainly can be done.

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FLAX ENABLES DUAL INCOME FOR PRODUCERS

Almost everyone in Saskatchewan is familiar with the beauty of a flowering flax crop. Not only are the blue fields in bloom a marvel to the eye, but the plant is also versatile in function. Flax producers have opportunities for dual revenue streams by making use of both the seed and the fibre.

When flax was originally grown in Saskatchewan, production centred around Regina, Elrose and Rosetown. Over time, the crop migrated eastward. It grows well along the Manitoba border, as well as in certain pockets of south-western Saskatchewan.

According to Gordon Rowland, a flax breeder at the Crop Development Centre in Saskatoon, the interest in flax stems from the fact that it can halt the build-up of soil-borne diseases such as sclerotinia and blackleg.

The plant requires heavier-textured soil to grow, hence its suitability to the fertile eastern Saskatchewan grain belt. For weather, flax thrives with 16 to 18 inches of moisture, moderately warm temperatures in July, and warm, dry temperatures in late summer as the crop ripens.

When first planted, flax needs a soil temperature of 10 degrees Celsius. The crop takes 100 to 130 days to mature, depending on the time of planting.

For this growing season, market conditions look good, according to Allen Kuhlmann, chair of the Saskatchewan Flax Development Commission (SFDC). "Acreage is believed to only increase slightly this year and, therefore, prices should stay fairly buoyant," Kuhlmann said, adding that he expects prices in the low teens per bushel.

Also affecting market conditions are the actions of international players in the flax industry. As most of the world's flax is grown in Europe, Canadian prices and acreage are often affected by subsidies offered overseas. Subsidies drive up production and decrease prices, but Kuhlmann believes these supports are falling.

In addition, the flax market in Ukraine is gaining momentum, so industry players will be monitoring growth from this nation.

To bolster opportunities within Canada and Saskatchewan, the SFDC and Crop Fibers Canada are taking decisive action.

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For eight years, the SFDC has been supporting crop breeding and agronomic programs to create dual-purpose flax. The seed is known for its high nutritional content, especially for omega-3 fatty acids. Industrial uses, such as the production of linoleum, are less obvious, but represent significant opportunity to the industry.

Aside from the seed, there is increasing interest in using bast fibres as an environmentally friendly alternative to building production and plastic composites.

Crop Fibers Canada is working with allied agencies to develop test protocols for grading and standards.

Kuhlmann feels that further development of the infrastructure must be undertaken to help flax realize its full potential. Actions include the development of breeding strategy programs, on-farm research programs relating to pre- and post-harvest technologies, market studies and the establishment of more processing facilities.

In the meantime, the industry players within Canada and Saskatchewan are active in NAFGEN (Natural Fibres for the Green Economy Network) – a partnership with the National Research Council, the National Biofibres Advisory Board and Flax Canada 2015 – an initiative to develop value-added opportunities for flax.

With the diverse utility of both the seed and the fibres, flax offers producers an opportunity for dual income.

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HOME-PRODUCED FOOD SUITS SPECIAL DIET

Nola Jacklin and her husband, Dave, have moved to Saskatchewan from Ontario. They moved to be closer to family, but also to purchase an acreage on which to grow their own food.

"I wanted an acreage where I could have my garden, my horses, my goats, my chickens – that kind of stuff," Jacklin said. Food production is important to Nola, because it helps her manage her dietary requirements related to lupus.

In the Jacklin's garden, she grows turnips, lettuce, beans and potatoes. Because of space restrictions, she buys cabbage and corn from the local Hutterite colony. Due to her special diet, she must stay away from broccoli, cauliflower and other plants in the alfalfa group. As well, she cannot eat citrus fruits. She believes these foods have a particular enzyme that does not agree with her stomach.

The Jacklins preserve what fruits and vegetables they do not eat fresh.

The couple also raise livestock to prepare their own meats and make their own sausage. They raise sheep, goats, pigs and chickens. Nola also purchases free-range bison from the Lockwood area.

Because Jacklin is lactose-intolerant, she has become an expert on making dairy products using goats' milk. She does not find a difference in taste between cow and goat dairy products, although she notices a slight difference in texture between the cheeses. Goat cheese is softer, but she has adapted her recipe to make her mozzarella, which she considers to be her specialty, easier to slice.

Jacklin also makes yogurt, sour cream and ice cream. To satisfy her sweet tooth, Jacklin makes cheesecake. "I love cheesecake, but of course, I can't have regular cream cheese, so I have made a cream cheese from goats' milk," she said.

Finally, Jacklin makes her own bread. Because she and her husband do not grow grain, she buys flour and yeast commercially.

Jacklin says food production does not take a great deal of time if you are a well-organized person and get into a routine.

The goats are milked daily, and when Jacklin makes yogurt, she makes eight portions at a time, which she flavours with fruit. The yogurt is set at night for processing. Ice cream takes about half-an-hour.

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The canning of fruits and vegetables can be labour-intensive, but the work is seasonal. She does not spend any longer than two to three hours a day canning. If she is pressed for time, she freezes the fruit and completes the preservation in the wintertime.

Jacklin still must buy a certain amount of commercial food. "There are just some things that I haven't learned to make yet," she chuckled.

The move to Saskatchewan has had a positive effect on Jacklin's lupus symptoms. Aside from dietary management, a key difference relates to water. Not only do the Jacklins receive superior drinking water from their well, but the reduced air humidity has also been beneficial. In Ontario, she was prone to rashes on exposed skin.

Homemade food has health benefits, and Jacklin encourages people of all conditions of health to adopt her food lifestyle. "The more natural products you can eat, the better for you." The nutritional quality of Jacklin's whole foods, and the quality of life in Saskatchewan in general, have served her well.

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CONVERSION TO PERENNIAL FORAGE HAS BENEFITS

When choosing from among summer fallow, annual cropping and perennial forage for land use, perennial forage is the option that provides the most environmental benefits. Good management also enables high yields for pasture and hay.

According to Saskatchewan Ministry of Agriculture forage crop specialist Michel Tremblay, increased soil fertility is one of the key environmental benefits to perennial forages. "There are some soil benefits that accrue due to an increase in organic matter." It takes time to increase fertility, but the normal decay of grass roots over time will return nutrients to the soil.

Forages also prevent soil and water erosion, thereby protecting watersheds. "Perennial cover reduces water erosion, diffuses the energy of rainfall, increases the permeability of the soil, and acts to filter out contaminants before they get into water courses," said Tremblay.

Finally, perennial cover is beneficial for wildlife. "Sometimes perennial forage makes a fragmented landscape more contiguous in terms of cover from one area to another," Tremblay noted. There is also less disturbance to the site, which allows more heterogeneous habitats across the landscape. Compared to perennial forage areas, there is low wildlife density in annual cropping sites.

Producers often choose marginal land for perennial forages. "Usually the land that isn't good for crop land is converted first," said Tremblay. "Sometimes it's problem soils, erosion-prone soils, saline soils – they'll usually get converted." Such factors, as well as soil pH, drainage and texture often determine what forage species should be planted when converting to perennial cover.

Soil factors can also support the case for moving away from annual cropping. "Soils with inherently low fertility, with high cost of inputs – especially sandy soils, gray-wooded soils – they are low in a number of different nutrients," said Tremblay. "The fertilizer bill for annual production can be pretty expensive. You're not only putting on nitrogen, you've got to deal with sulfur, phosphorous and sometimes potash.

"It gets to the point where you have to ask yourself, 'How many nutrients do I have to put into this particular piece of ground?' It might make sense instead to rent another piece of property and put this one back to perennial cover or use it for something else."

When preparing the seedbed for perennial forage, producers should ensure that weeds are controlled and that there is no herbicide residue in the soil.

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A soil temperature ranging between 10 and 20 degrees Celsius is ideal for germination.

Perennial cover is a productive land use that increases soil fertility, creates habitat for wildlife, reduces soil erosion and protects the watershed. With quality seed and good management, the result could be high pasture and hay yields.

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AGRICULTURE VOLUNTEER ATTENDS LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE

Early in May, an active agricultural volunteer from Kelliher attended a womens' leadership conference in the United States.

Lilliane Sabiston was one of five recipients of the Rosemary Davis Award presented by Farm Credit Canada (FCC). As part of the honour, she attended the 2008 Simmons School of Management's Dialogue and Discovery Conference.

More than 3,000 women attended the conference held in Boston.

Sabiston farms in partnership with her husband in the Rural Municipality of Kellross. They grow oilseeds, oats and barley. The couple is gradually winding down their farming operation as they look to retire.

It was for her volunteerism, however, that Sabiston was selected as the award recipient.

Her volunteer work began when she was recruited for the Carlton Trail Regional College board of directors. It gave her a broad variety of experience.

In the following years, because of an interest in health care, she successfully ran for election to the local health region's board of directors. She has served on many other boards over the years.

Today, Sabiston is the chair of the Saskatchewan Farm Stress Line Advisory Group, an organization she first joined in 1995. Sabiston notes the importance of the service. "I think it's quite valuable, because you have people who are in distress," she said.

She also values the advisory group's board of directors, because it is a diverse collection of people with broad experiences.

The success of the Saskatchewan Farm Stress Line Advisory Group is evident in the gratitude expressed by producers. Sabiston notes it is important to relate to fellow farmers. She has received positive feedback regarding the understanding and empathy of the counsellors.

Sabiston is driven in her volunteer efforts by the opportunity to care of other people. "I just really like helping others – I always have," she said. "You just meet some really nice people out there, especially in the agricultural industry."

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She applauds FCC for the recognition they give to the farm women. "It's not an everyday thing. It is nice to be recognized. A lot of women worked their whole lives, and in years gone by, they didn't have the opportunities that I have had," Sabiston stated.

She believes that recognition is important and deserves to be shared. As such, Sabiston intends to nominate a deserving candidate for the FCC honour next year.

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